

The 1996 Rio Grande National Forest: What Needs to Change

This document is draft and is designed to launch the proposed action development phase of the [Rio Grande National Forest plan revision process](#).

The current [Land and Resource Management Plan](#) (forest plan) for the Rio Grande National Forest is nearly 20 years old. The forest is currently in the process of developing a new plan that guides how it will be managed over the next 15 to 20 years. Recently completed [assessment reports](#) provide information on the current “state of the forest,” including conditions, trends, and risks to sustainability. A product of an extensive public process, nearly 20 years of forest monitoring reports, and other available reports and data, these assessment reports are informed by the best available scientific information and provide guidance on what needs to change in the 1996 forest plan to ensure the sustainability and resiliency of resources, goods, and services on the Rio Grande. The forest will be taking comments on the draft assessments and Needs for Change document through the spring of 2016, but comments would be most timely and helpful by April 15, 2016. Please send comments to rgnf_forest_plan@fs.fed.us.

What is a Forest Plan?

A forest plan is the overarching direction for all management decisions and projects on the Rio Grande, constrained by law, regulation, and policy. Written as a snapshot in time and reflecting a philosophy of management from both the agency and the public, a forest plan helps define the management-area direction on the forest, literally lines drawn on the map, as well as the desired conditions and related standards and guidelines for management priorities of those areas. A forest plan is also a physical, bound, three-volume publication that includes a Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement, and Appendices, and it is used daily as a reference guide and dog-eared on resource managers’ and line officers’ desks.

The current forest plan for the Rio Grande is available in hard copy at the forest offices in La Jara, Monte Vista, Del Norte, and Saguache as well as on the website at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/riogrande/landmanagement/planning>.

“There is a delight in the hardy life of the open...The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased and not impaired in value. Conservation means development as much as it does protection.”

- Theodore Roosevelt

Why a Need for Change Document?

To initiate the proposed action development phase of the revision process, the [2012 Planning Rule](#) requires the forest to present a document to the public at the end of the assessment phase explaining what needs to be revised from the previous plan. This Needs for Change document identifies the needs and desires to change the 1996 Forest Plan, as recommended during the assessment phase discussed above. Change criteria are described below, and the specific changes under consideration are identified in Tables A through D.

A: Requirements in the forest plan revision process: Many federal laws, regulations, and policies govern the work of forest staff every day. These requirements are *non-discretionary* for the forest supervisor, who is the deciding official in the revision process.

B: Changes needed throughout the previous plan: These needs for change are the first level of discretionary needs identified by the deciding official. They represent *overarching* general needs that were commonly, and in many cases overwhelmingly, identified through a combination of the assessments, public comments, tribal consultation, internal comments, or a combination of all of these means of seeking input for the revised forest plan.

C: Changes identified through the Assessment phase: These needs for change are the second level of discretionary needs identified by the deciding official. They may be considered due to clear gaps in the previous plan, or represent *specific* needs that were identified through a combination of the assessments, public comments, tribal consultation, internal comments, or a combination of all of these means of seeking input for the revised forest plan. At this time, the deciding official believes these needs for change are relevant, timely, and appropriate for evaluation as a proposed action in the environmental analysis phase of the revision process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA phase).

D: Desires identified through the Assessment phase: These desires for change are the third level of discretionary needs considered by the deciding official. They represent *specific* needs that were identified through a combination of the assessments, public comments, tribal consultation, internal comments, or a combination of all of these means of seeking input for the revised forest plan. At this time, the deciding official believes these needs may be relevant, timely, and appropriate for further analysis in the NEPA phase. The deciding official, with public and interdisciplinary team involvement, will make a subsequent decision on whether to change this from a desire to a clear need for change. If it is decided to drop one or more of these desires from consideration after further analysis and subsequent decision, a clear rationale will be provided.

Table A. Requirements in the Forest Plan Revision Process

<i>Requirement</i>		<i>Basis for Requirement</i>
A1	Re-evaluate the suitability of timber management areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Forest Management Act • Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act • 2012 Planning Rule, Chapter 60
A2	Conduct an inventory, evaluation, analysis, and recommendation of new wilderness areas on the Rio Grande National Forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wilderness Act • 2012 Planning Rule, Chapter 70
A3	Identify and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wild and Scenic Rivers Act • 2012 Planning Rule, Chapter 80
A4	Update plan direction to further promote the recovery and conservation of federally recognized threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endangered Species Act • 2012 Planning Rule
A5	Revise the previous plan to provide management direction to manage habitat to ensure viable populations of species of conservation concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012 Planning Rule • Discussion in Assessment 5
A6	Revise the previous plan to incorporate management direction related to renewable energy, including reasonably foreseeable transmission corridors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012 Planning Rule • Identification in Assessment 10, Energy and Minerals
A7	Revise management direction related to climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012 Planning Rule
A8	Consider goals and objectives of the Forest Service strategic plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012 Planning Rule
A9	Develop sustainable management direction for current and future recreation trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012 Planning Rule • Identified in Assessment 9, Recreation

Table B. Changes Needed Throughout the Previous Plan

<i>Needed Change</i>		<i>Basis for Change</i>
B1	Revise the accessibility of the previous plan to the public, including incorporating contemporary ecological terminology, current and changing technology and web-based tools to facilitate the diverse needs of the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in public meetings • Identified by forest staff
B2	Re-evaluate the number, arrangement, boundaries, and plan direction related to the current forest plan management areas to minimize complexity and maximize ecosystem integrity and connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012 Planning Rule • Identified in Assessments 1 and 3 • Identification by the public and forest staff
B3	Revise the current plan to allow for more adaptive management to better meet and monitor desired conditions related to climate change and fluctuations in forest budgets, through the help of partnerships, volunteers, and citizen scientists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification by the public and forest staff
B4	Revise the current plan to include management approaches that consider local economies, markets, and partnership opportunities as tools for meeting desired conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification by the public
B5	Revise the current plan to include management approaches that ensure for sustainable infrastructure related to recreation, forest health and habitat connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012 Planning Rule • Identification by forest staff

“The land belongs to the future ...that’s the way it seems to me. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it — for a little while.”

- Willa Cather, Writer

Table C. Changes Identified through the Assessment Phase

<i>Identified Change</i>		<i>Basis for Change</i>
C1	Revise the current forest plan to allow for better integration, clearer direction, and more flexibility with regard to the use of prescribed and naturally occurring fire as a management tool and disturbance agent within the constraints of human health and safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 1, Ecosystem Integrity • Identification by the public
C2	Update the existing forest-wide air monitoring plan and 1994 Wilderness Air Quality Monitoring Plan reflecting current best management practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 2, Air, Soils, and Water Resources • Internal staff recommendations
C3	Revise the previous plan to identify priority watersheds to reflect the current best management practices including the Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook, National Best Management Practices program, and Watershed Condition Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessments 1 and 2 • Internal staff recommendations • 2012 Planning Rule
C4	Update the previous plan to incorporate the negotiated in-stream flow water rights language and decree between the Rio Grande National Forest and the State of Colorado from 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 2 • Internal staff recommendations • Identification by the public
C5	Revise the previous plan to provide management direction for the Old Spanish National Historic Trail, including language from the Old Spanish National Historic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan when completed by the National Park Service; for the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDT), including language from the 2009 CDT Comprehensive Plan; for the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, Cumbres and Toltec National Historic Landmark; and for the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessments 13 and 15 • Internal staff recommendations • Identification by the public
C6	Evaluate additional areas for special designation, including areas with cultural values, opportunities for connectivity, and areas important for the protection of plant communities and special habitats vulnerable to climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessments 12 and 15 • Internal staff recommendations • Identification by the public
C7	Revisit the size of the Fremont Special Interest Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 13 • Internal staff recommendations

Table D. Desired Changes Identified through the Assessment Phase

<i>Desired Change</i>		<i>Basis for Change</i>
D1	Update the definition and management direction for late successional/old growth forest and woodland communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 1 • Internal staff recommendations
D2	Revisit the oil and gas Leasing Available Analysis completed for the 1996 Forest Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 10 • Identification by the public
D3	More efficiently manage wilderness areas across administrative boundaries shared with adjacent forests, and better incorporate the 1993 Colorado Wilderness Act and language specifically regarding Wheeler Geologic Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal staff recommendations
D4	Develop and maintain sustainable enterprises that contribute to the general economic and social vitality of the area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessments 6, 7, and 8, Social, Cultural, and Economic Resources and Ecosystem Services • Identification by the public
D5	Maintain the quality of visitor experiences while providing forest products and cultural and recreational experiences to a greater number of people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessments 6, 7, and 8 • Identification by the public
D6	Revisit how managing for multiple uses on the forest affects cultural resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 13, Cultural and Historic Resources • Identification by the public
D7	Evaluate additional protection of two critically significant areas, Mt. Blanca Massif and the Natural Arch, while maintaining motorized access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 12, Tribal Resources • Tribal consultation
D8	Consider additional management direction for recreational climbing in relation to sensitive heritage resources and habitat like peregrine falcon nests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal staff recommendations
D9	Update management direction to maintain separation between bighorn and domestic sheep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification by a 2010 internal Conservation Assessment
D10	Additional management direction regarding recreational pack goats on the Rio Grande National Forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal staff recommendations
D11	Revisit the stay limits on the forest in managed and dispersed campsites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal staff recommendations

D12	Revisit the Capacity Allocation Process related to special use permits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal staff recommendations
D13	Revisit the off-road game retrieval policy on the Rio Grande National Forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal staff recommendations • Identification by the public
D14	Revise the communication sites identified in the current forest plan (and the approval policy), considering internal needs, potential changes in technology, and future needs of the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 11, Infrastructure • Internal staff recommendations • Identification by the public
D15	Address new technology, including the use of drones on the forest, as well as alternative energy sites and fiber optic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 11, Infrastructure • Identified by youth
D16	Consider better access and management flexibility to maintain irrigation structures, such as dams and diversions, in wilderness areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessments 2 and 6 • Identified by the public •
D17	Update plan direction to protect and ensure legal access for public, private, and tribal needs in cases of fragmentation of forest lands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 14, Land Status, Ownership, Use, and Access • Internal staff recommendations • Identification by the public
D18	Prioritize acquisition of inholdings appropriate for the management and continuity of forest land and collaborate more effectively with other private, state, and federal land owners of lands that border the forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 14, Land Status, Ownership, Use, and Access • Internal staff recommendations • Identification by the public
D19	Update plan direction for the removal of common mineral materials, such as commercial contracts, personal, ceremonial, and free use permits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification in Assessment 10, Energy and Minerals • Internal staff recommendations • Identification by the public